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ABSTRACT

Television aesthetics is the study of the compositional principles pertinent to the television medium in which basic elements of the television picture such as light, color, framing, space, time, motion, editing, sound, etc. are examined in relation to the finished product, the television program. The major areas covered by television aesthetics are perception, cognition, and composition. Any analysis of the content or message of educational television programs should consider criteria concerning the content or message, the medium or form, and the impact or effect on the audience. Although these criteria help to describe and analyze the programs as educational television formats, they do not reveal much about the artistic value, the aesthetics of the particular program. Television aesthetics can show the perceptual, cognitive, and compositional factors that unify, harmonize, and balance the visual and auditory elements into an aesthetically pleasing program. When used systematically, these aesthetic principles of television directly improve the quality of educational programs. The understanding and application of the aesthetic principles governing the medium of television--as established by the field of television aesthetics--will result in the development of more progressive, artistic, challenging, and sophisticated educational programs and, in the long run, will improve the field of educational technology. (A diagram of the steps in an aesthetic analysis of educational television programs and 33 references are attached.) (PRA)

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APPLIED TELEVISION AESTHETICS IN EDUCATION

by

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the role of television aesthetics in the development of education. Specifically, (1) the field of television aesthetics is briefly introduced, (2) the direct application of television aesthetics to educational television programs is discussed, and (3) the significant contribution of television aesthetics to education is underlined.

It is concluded that understanding and application of the aesthetic principles governing the medium of television—as established by the field of television aesthetics— will result in the development of more progressive, artistic, challenging, and sophisticated educational programs, and, in the long run, will improve the field of educational technology.

APPLIED TELEVISION AESTHETICS IN EDUCATION

The growing dependence on rapidly developing communication media technologies such as digital or computerized television (DVE), teletexts, video texts, etc. (McCavitt, 1983), raises the question of whether or not such media are properly used by educators and students alike.

Although this subject is complicated, an attempt will be made here to point out how important the study of the particular principles that govern the visual communication media in general, and television in particular is in the development of education. Either as a discussion provocateur and initiator, or as a learning vehicle, television is widely used in the classroom today, and, along with computers, has become vitally important to educators and students. However, the main purpose for which television pictures are used (content), the particular ways in which TV pictures are structured (medium), and the direct impact television pictures have on the viewers of educational television programming (audience) are but three areas which have not been emphasized sufficiently by educators using television technology to enhance learning. In a broader sense, these three areas constitute the field known as television meta-criticism, or television aesthetics (Beardsley, 1958), and is defined as the study of the compositional principles pertinent to the television medium in which the basic elements of the television picture such as light, color, framing, space, time, motion, editing, sound, etc., are examined in relation to the finished product, the television program. Hence, (1) the field of television aesthetics is briefly introduced (2) the direct application of television aesthetics to educational television programming is discussed, and (3) the specific contribution of this field of study to education is underlined.

TELEVISION AESTHETICS: ITS EVOLUTION AND ITS DOMAIN

The field of television aesthetics, like the similar fields of aesthetics in painting, photography, and, generally, the arts, evolved from the field of criticism. The description, interpretation and evaluation of television programs by various television commentators, observers and critics generated the need to examine the critical statements more thoroughly and to

relate them to the medium of television. It is for this reason that criticism of the arts has also been named meta-criticism, and television meta-criticism is synonymous with the term *television aesthetics* (Dickie, 1971). The efforts of pioneer television critics first to identify and then to describe, interpret and evaluate the particular features of television programs resulted in the development of the field of television aesthetics. This is evidenced from the statements made by several pioneering scholars of the new field. For example, according to Tarroni (1979, pp. 437-461), the study of the instruments, materials and techniques utilized by television, constitutes the field of television aesthetics. According to Steinberg (1974, pp. 42-58), the development of the field of television aesthetics is possible as long as such unique factors of the medium as screen size, continuity, economy, pictorial nature, intimacy, and its social functions are the bases for its evaluation. For Newcomb (1982, pp. 478-494), the development of the field of television aesthetics should be based on the sociological function of the medium. Such functions should be extended to include the unique features of intimacy, continuity and history. In discussing the parameters for the study of the field of television aesthetics, Zettl (1978) contends that the factor analysis approach which takes into consideration the basic television picture elements of light, color, space, time, motion and sound should constitute the field of television aesthetics.

We suggest that the domain of the field of television aesthetics be expanded beyond the sociological, semiotic or linguistic approaches as has been the practice during the last 50 years. The medium is not an isolated sociological, or a unique linguistic phenomenon only to be studied by these respected fields. It is a complex phenomenon which is better understood if it is examined from all sides and by of many different disciplines whether they fall under the arts or under the sciences.

In my approach, the major areas covered by television aesthetics, the bases upon which the study of television aesthetics is built, or the axies that constitute the field known as television aesthetics, are **perception**, **cognition**, and **composition**. These will be briefly outlined.

Perception

A basic prerequisite for the study and understanding of the workings of the visual communication media is perception, both visual and auditory. This, in turn, requires additional knowledge and understanding of neurophysiology, of the eye, the ear and the brain. The process of visual and auditory perception and the basic mechanisms employed by the human brain are prerequisites for the study of television images. Numerous scientific studies now found in such diversified fields as perceptual psychology, neurophysiology, experimental psychology, cybernetics, and communications confirm how fundamentally important perception is to the study of the structure of television images. The findings of these studies outline the basic principles of visual and auditory perception as they relate to the structure of television images. For example, such important perceptual factors as central and peripheral visions, distal, proximal and perceived stimuli differences, pattern, size, depth, and spatial relationships, sound location, distant cues, sound and noise differences (Murch, 1973), light, color, and motion are paramount for the proper structure of television images. Knowledge of the limitations—what the human visual and auditory apparati can do—and understanding of the potentials—how far these organs can be stressed—are major prerequisites for the formation of compositional principles governing the medium of television (Haber, 1968).

Cognition

Another prerequisite for the study and understanding of the workings of the visual communication media is cognition, the processing of new data of sights and noise to meaningful images and sounds. Defined specifically as "the act or process of knowing including both awareness and judgement" (Webster's, 1983, p. 257) cognition here is synonymous to comprehension, interpretation and understanding of pictures and sounds. Whereas the process of visual and auditory perception is mostly dealt with in the field of experimental psychology, the process of knowing, understanding and interpreting such phenomena is dealt with in the field of cognitive psychology. In both of these domains, perception and cognition, the field of neurophysiology is involved. But, in perception, we are mainly concerned with the neurophysiology of the eyes and the ears, whereas in cognition, we are dealing principally with the neurology of the human brain.

Both fields, cognitive psychology and the neurophysiology of the brain have produced a large number of scientific studies pertinent to the comprehension and understanding of pictures and sounds. The extensive bibliographies of recent studies on left and right brain specialization related to picture orientation, recognition and understanding alone is testimony to the importance of cognition as a major domain—a significant axis—in the establishment of the compositional principles of television pictures (Metallinos, 1975; Needham, 1973; Orstein, 1972; Springer, & Deutsch, 1985).

Composition

The third axis upon which the field of television aesthetics is built is composition, defined as the act or process of composing into proper proportions and relation, especially into artistic form (Webster's, 1983, p. 270). In this study, composition refers to the structure of television images which is based on the existing rules of composition of the arts in general, and the performing arts in particular. This domain expands to include necessary knowledge of several additional related fields: (1) history of the arts,which places the art products in their appropriate historical context, (2) art design and composition, which establishes the various forms of the arts pertinent to their nature, (3) art appreciation, which underlines the specific criteria for the analysis of the specific art forms, (4) philosophy of the arts, which discusses the theories, the concepts and the literature of the arts, (5) art criticism, which describes, analyses and evaluates particular works of art, and (6) meta-criticism or philosophy of criticism, which are synonymous terms for the field known as aesthetics of the arts and which, according to Dickie (1971, p. 44), ". . .is conceived as the philosophical activity which analyzes and clarifies the basic concepts which art critics use when they describe, interpret, or evaluate particular works of art."

All these fields have produced a sizeable amount of research studies which have advanced the development of the compositional principles governing the medium of television.

Based on the studies of the above related fields, television programs of today can potentially be composed in accordance with specific techniques in television lighting, color,

staging, framing, editing, audio set-up, etc. (Dondis, 1973; Lewis, 1968; Millerson, 1972A; Wurtzel, 1979; Zettl, 1973).

TELEVISION AESTHETICS: ITS APPLICATION TO EDUCATIONAL TELEVISION PROGRAMS

As one of the most important genders of television programming, educational television includes such known categories as children's television programming, public affair programs, documentaries, dramas, science, language, leisure, instructional programs, etc. (Combes, & Tiffin, 1978; Hancock, 1976; Ploghoft, & Anderson, 1981; Swallow, 1966). Each of these categories is unique in that each serves a special purpose, a message to be transformed; each one has a different idiosyncratic structure, its own technique of transmitting the message; and each performs a unique function, has a different goal to achieve. Consequently, the analysis of any educational television programs should bring into focus all these elements (Metallinos, 1985). Such questions as (1) what is the purpose of this television program?, (2) how effectively were the various production elements of the program put together?, and (3) what was the ultimate function of this particular program? are critical questions which should be raised by the television critic, or analyst. They examine the content or message of educational television programs, discuss the internal structure, the production factors of the program, and, finally, they evaluate the impact of the program on its target audience.

The following is an inclusive list of criteria for the analysis and evaluation of educational television programs:

Criteria Concerning the Content or Message

1. Content/message significance and importance
2. Accuracy of ideas and documentation
3. Writing style and format (or genre)
4. Composition and dramaturgy of story
5. Order and balance of segments
6. Simplicity and complexity of treatment

Criteria Concerning the Medium or Form

Production Factors

1. Lighting technique usage and effects, colors, and visual clarity
2. Cameras, lenses, effects, framing, staging, space utilization and background–middleground–foreground interrelationships, screen composition, setting, etc.
3. Pace, motion, rhythm, editing techniques, special effects, graphics, etc.
4. Audio sound clarity, sound consistency, and coherence. Audio perspective, matching visuals with sounds, audio-visual reenforcement, audio-visual balance, etc.

Performing Factors

1. Performers' appearance, clothing, colors, etc.
2. Age, sex, and character choices.
3. Body movements, stage (or camera) presence.
4. Eye contact, lens acting, naturalness
5. Character interpretation and fitness within the context of the program
6. Delivery and believability of characters

Criteria concerning the Program's Impact/Effect on the Audience

1. Audience identification. Who are the viewers?
2. Does the program fulfill its intended scope?
3. Audience reactions. Do they like it? If so, why? If not, why not?
4. Overall importance/significance/usefulness of the program to the target audience and to society at large.
5. Is the program tasteful? Does it contain violence, conflicts, models or concepts which should not be aired?
6. What specific public needs does the program fulfill? (i.e., sociological, aesthetic, psychological, physiological, etc.)
7. Innovation – to what degree is the program different?

Although these criteria help us to describe and to analyze the programs as educational television formats, they do not tell us much about the artistic value, the aesthetics, of the particular program. We need to know more about the program regarding the perceptual, cognitive and compositional principles that unify, harmonize and balance all its visual and auditory elements to make up an aesthetically pleasing program.. Here is where television aesthetics comes in. The meta-critical questions and the criteria for the aesthetic evaluation of educational television programs stemming from the three major domains of the field are included in the lists below which are not exhaustive or exclusive:

Perceptual Factors

1. Synthesis, function, harmony of light and colors
2. Sensational versus perceptual stimuli factors
3. Harmony and proportion of the distal, the proximal, and the perceived stimuli
4. Size, depth, patterns, relationships, consistency preferences, etc.
5. Motion, timing, rhythms, causality factors
6. Sound, noise differences; which is which?
7. Illusions and realities in visual and auditory stimuli
8. Figure-ground consistencies in visual and auditory stimuli
9. The visual world versus the visual field.
10. Steraophonic and monophonic perception of television messages
11. 2-D versus 3-D televised messages
12. etc.

Cognitive Factors

1. The human brain and the human mind—biological and psychological differences
2. Description of pictures, lights, colors, objects, shapes, etc.
3. Recognition of picture elements, placement, patterns, etc.
4. Interpretation of symbols, configurations of patterns, Gestalt, etc.
5. Understanding of motion, form, timing, etc.

6. Symbolism, abstraction, representation of pictures and sounds; three forms of visual imaging
7. The holistic and the logical (left and right) brain orientation of visual and auditory messages
8. Semantic meanings in pictorial and auditory messages
9. Syntactical meanings in pictorial and auditory messages
10. Memory, imagination and thinking as factors in understanding pictorial and auditory messages
11. Skill, experience and knowledge as determining factors in the cognition of pictorial and auditory messages
12. etc.

Compositional Factors

1. Elements of direction, proportion and balance in the televised program
2. The factors of shape, form, space, growth, tension, expression, contrast, etc., in the construction of visual and auditory messages
3. Anatomy of the televised message such as dots, lines, tones, texture, dimension, scale, etc.
4. Factor analysis of the complete television program in the areas of lighting, color, staging, depth, cues, sizes, time and motion, controls, editing techniques and audio techniques
5. Identification and interpretation of visual and auditory styles and form of televised messages
6. Tasteful, harmonious, pleasurable, etc., pictorial and auditory elements
7. Beautiful, artistic, delightful, etc. visual and auditory elements
8. Refined, dynamic, joyful, etc. visual and auditory elements
9. Continuity, orientation, size, etc. of visual and auditory elements
10. Economy, clarity, precision, etc. of visual and auditory elements
11. Unity, regularity, consistency, etc. of visual and auditory elements
12. etc.

When used systematically, these aesthetic principles of television, clustered under the domains of perception, cognition, and composition, directly improve the quality of educational television programs. These are the yardsticks, the measuring devices and the analytical tools

which, when applied properly and systematically, determine the degree of the aesthetic merits of the various educational television programs.

TELEVISION AESTHETICS: ITS CONTRIBUTION TO EDUCATION

The contributions of television aesthetics to the field of education is significant. The important works of such pioneers in television production, directors, educators and researchers as Bretz (1976), Combes (1978), Hancock (1976), Lewis (1968), Millerson (1972), Zettl (1967), etc., have assisted in the development of educational television. Inspired broadcast educators and researchers such as Chu and Schramm (1967), Gordon (1970), Head and Sterling (1990), Kittros (1967), Waniewicz (1762), etc. have contributed, significantly, and inspired the establishment of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPS) which created the national network known as the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). These helped to improve the quality of television programming and provided access to specialized programs for special interest groups away from industry's major network programming for the masses.

For the most part, it was the educational broadcasting curricula developed in universities and colleges in North America, side by side with the closed circuit TV used within these institutions which laid the foundations for better, more specialized and artistic educational television programming (Kittros, 1990; Metallinos, 1978). The well thought out, planned, researched and produced experimental, artistic and educational television programs generated by such special interest groups as the Children's Television Workshop, or such special television channels as WNET in New York, WBGH and WBUR in Boston, and KQED in San Francisco pioneered the development of experimental video arts and educational television programming.

The understanding by television practitioners, educators and researchers that the medium shapes the message, caused the revolution of educational television programming. The traditional content analysis of the programs is now shifting to an analysis of the medium itself, its use—or abuse— of lights, framing, editing, audio set-ups, etc. Since the late 60's, broadcast educators have suggested such a shift of emphasis in educational television. Zettl (1967, p. 230) stated that:

> What we must realize is that we can no longer afford to look at the television as a black channel, a convenient medium for distributing ready-made messages. The medium characteristics and potentials are as important to the final outcome on the screen as is the original message. As a matter of fact, I think that the effect of a television message on the viewer is, to a large extent a condition of the effect of the television medium on the message.

The study of the elements that constitute the television production and the specific medium related variables which influence the viewer's attention, comprehension and appreciation of televised messages, are the province of the field of television aesthetics. Empirical research in television composition, as limited as it might be (Metallinos, 1985), produced a sizeable body of work which has strengthened the field of aesthetics and, at the same time, improved the programming of numerous educational television genres.

The diversity of subject matter, the detailed care of the production processes and techniques, the serious concerns for the specialized viewer, the understanding of the limits and the potentials of the medium, are additional contributing factors in the development of educational television programs. Today, the educational television networks and their programs are considered to be (1) of high quality, (2) sophisticated yet artistic, (3) serious and informative, (4) objective, (5) diversified and multifaceted, (6) responsible and sensitive towards viewers, (6) mindful of the needs and aspirations of a vast majority of people, and, at the same time, tasteful and highly entertaining. All this has resulted from the indirect and invisible influences of the growing field of television aesthetics.

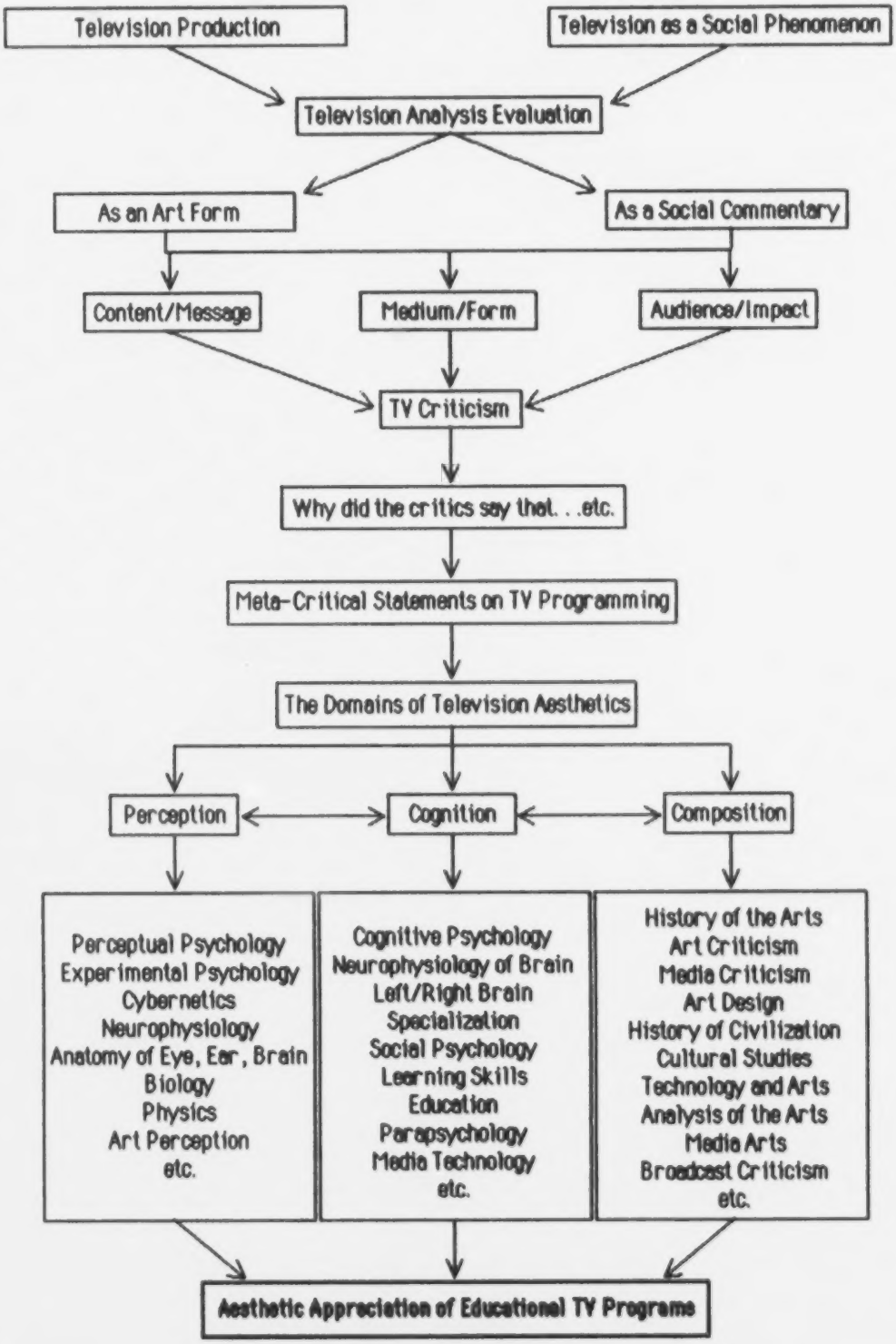
The successful children's program *Sesame Street*, for example, is the result of the rigorous study of the production variables involved in all three aspects—(1) subject matter (content/message), (2) production techniques (medium/form), and (3) the children (the viewers/target audience). Equally, the perceptual, cognitive and compositional factors of the program were systematically employed by the producers of this extraordinarily successful program.

In short, the success of educational television productions and the great popularity of its programming is the result of the application of the findings of aesthetic principles unique to the medium of television.

In conclusion, this article contends that knowledge, understanding and direct application of the established aesthetic principles governing the medium of television as underlined by the field of television aesthetics, could, potentially, result in the development of better, yet educational, television programming in the short run, and improve the field of education in the long run.

Schematically, the process described above and the steps that must be followed to improve the quality of future educational television programs is given in the diagram below:

Aesthetic Analysis of Educational TV Programs



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